WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1.   A computer-implemented method for enabling perception of multiple online personas in an instant messaging communications session, the method comprising:

5   identifying at least two identities within a communications environment to whom messages may be directed; and

enabling a first persona of a user to be projected to a first of the identities while enabling a second persona of the same user to be concurrently projected to a second of the identities,

10   wherein:

the first and second personas each comprise an avatar capable of being animated, and

the first persona and the second persona differ.

2.   The method of claim 1 wherein the first persona differs from the second

15 persona such that first persona invokes a different avatar than an avatar invoked by the second persona.

3.   The method of claim 1 wherein:

the first persona invokes a first avatar,

20   the second persona invokes a second avatar,

the first avatar and the second avatar are the same avatar, and

an animation associated with the first avatar is different from animations associated with the second avatar.

25   4.   The method of claim 1 wherein:

the first persona invokes a first avatar,

the second persona invokes a second avatar,

the first avatar and the second avatar are the same avatar, and

an appearance associated with the first avatar is different from appearances associated

30 with the second avatar.

5.   The method of claim 1 wherein at least one of the avatars comprises an avatar that is associated with multiple sounds.

6.   The method of claim 1 wherein at least one of the avatars comprises an avatar

5   capable of being animated persona based on text of a message sent in the instant message communications session.

7.   The method of claim 1 wherein at least one of the avatars comprises an avatar capable of being animated to send an out-of-band communication.

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8.   The method of claim 1 further comprising associating the first persona with a first group of identities so that the first persona is projected in communications sessions with members of the first group of identities.

15   9.   The method of claim 8 further comprising associating the second persona with a second group of identities so that the second persona is projected in communications sessions with members of the second group of identities.

10.   The method of claim 1 further comprising associating a persona with the first

20   of the identities and associating a different persona with a group of the identities with which the first of the identities is associated, wherein the first persona projected to the first of the identities comprises an amalgamation of the persona associated with the first of the identities and the different persona associated with the group of the identities.

25   11.   The method of claim 10 wherein the persona associated with the first of the identities overrides the different persona associated with the group of the identities to the extent a conflict exists.

12.   A computer-readable medium or propagated signal having embodied thereon

30   a computer program configured to enable perception of multiple online personas in an instant messaging communications session, the medium or signal comprising one or more code segments configured to

identify at least two identities within a communications environment to whom messages may be directed; and

enable a first persona of a user to be projected to a first of the identities while enabling a second persona of the same user to be concurrently projected to a second of the

5   identities,

wherein:

the first and second personas each comprise an avatar capable of being animated, and the first persona and the second persona differ.

10   13.   The medium of claim 12 wherein the first persona differs from the second persona such that first persona invokes a different avatar than an avatar invoked by the second persona.

14.   The medium of claim 12 wherein:

15   the first persona invokes a first avatar,

the second persona invokes a second avatar,

the first avatar and the second avatar are the same avatar, and

an animation associated with the first avatar is different from animations associated with the second avatar.

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15.   The medium of claim 12 wherein:

the first persona invokes a first avatar,

the second persona invokes a second avatar,

the first avatar and the second avatar are the same avatar, and

25   an appearance associated with the first avatar is different from appearances associated with the second avatar.

16.   The medium of claim 12 wherein at least one of the avatars comprises an

30   avatar capable of being animated based on text of a message sent in the instant message communications session.

17.   The medium of claim 12 wherein at least one of the avatars comprises an avatar capable of being animated to send an out-of-band communication.

18.   A system for enabling perception of multiple online personas in an instant messaging communications session, the system comprising a processor connected to a storage device and one or more input/output devices, wherein the processor is configured to:

identify at least two identities within a communications environment to whom messages may be directed; and

enable a first persona of a user to be projected to a first of the identities while enabling a second persona of the same user to be concurrently projected to a second of the identities,

wherein:

the first and second personas each comprise an avatar capable of being animated, and the first persona and the second persona differ.

19.   The system of claim 18 wherein the first persona differs from the second persona such that first persona invokes a different avatar than an avatar invoked by the second persona.

20.   The system of claim 18 wherein:

the first persona invokes a first avatar,

the second persona invokes a second avatar,

the first avatar and the second avatar are the same avatar, and

an animation associated with the first avatar is different from animations associated with the second avatar.

21.   The system of claim 18 wherein:

the first persona invokes a first avatar,

the second persona invokes a second avatar,

the first avatar and the second avatar are the same avatar, and

an appearance associated with the first avatar is different from appearances associated with the second avatar.

22.   The system of claim 18 wherein at least one of the avatars comprises an avatar capable of being animated persona based on text of a message sent in the instant message communications session.

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23.   The system of claim 18 wherein at least one of the avatars comprises an avatar capable of being animated to send an out-of-band communication.

24.   A system for enabling perception of multiple online personas in an instant

10   messaging communications session, the system comprising:

means to identify at least two identities within a communications environment to whom messages may be directed; and

means to enable a first persona of a user to be projected to a first of the identities while enabling a second persona of the same user to be concurrently projected to a second of

15   the identities,

wherein:

the first and second personas each comprise an avatar capable of being animated, and the first persona and the second persona differ.

20   25.   A computer-implemented method for enabling perception of multiple online personas in an instant messaging communications session, the method comprising:

rendering, on an instant messaging recipient system, an instant messaging application user interface for an instant messaging communications session involving at least one potential instant messaging recipient and a single potential instant messaging sender;

25   sending a message that includes a text message and a persona selected among multiple possible personas associated with the instant messaging sender to be displayed by the potential instant messaging recipient when displaying the text message, the selected persona comprising a collection of one or more self-expression items and a sender avatar capable of being animated; and

30   rendering the selected persona at the potential instant messaging recipient system when rendering another portion of the message.

26.   The method of claim 25 wherein the sender persona is selected by the instant messaging sender from the multiple possible personas associated with the instant messaging sender.

5   27.   The method of claim 25 wherein the persona is rendered before communications are initiated by the potential instant messaging sender.

28.   The method of claim 25 wherein the persona is rendered after communications are initiated by the potential instant messaging sender.

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29.   The method of claim 25 in which self-expression items comprise one or more of a wallpaper, an emoticon, and a sound.

30.   The method of claim 25 further comprising defining one or more personas.

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31.   The method of claim 30 further comprising:

assigning a first persona to a first potential instant messaging recipient so that the first persona is thereafter automatically invoked and projected, in an instant messaging communications session involving the first potential instant messaging recipient; and

20   assigning a second persona to a second potential instant messaging recipient so that the second persona is thereafter automatically invoked and projected, in an instant messaging communications session involving the second potential instant messaging recipient, wherein the second persona is at least partially distinguishable from the first persona.

25   32.   The method of claim 31 further comprising:

assigning a first persona to a first group of potential instant messaging recipients so that the first persona is thereafter automatically invoked and projected in an instant messaging communications session involving a member of the first group of potential instant messaging recipients; and

30   assigning a second persona to a second potential instant messaging recipient so that the second persona is thereafter automatically invoked and projected, in an instant messaging

communications session involving the second potential instant messaging recipient, wherein the second persona is at least partially distinguishable from the first persona.

33.   The method of claim 25 further comprising disabling use of one of the multiple personas.

34.   The method of claim 25 wherein disabling use of one of the multiple personas comprises disabling use of one of the multiple personas based on the instant messaging recipient.

35.   The method of claim 25 wherein:

one of the multiple personas comprise a work persona associated with presence of the instant messaging sender at a work location associated with the instant messaging sender, and

one of the multiple personas comprise a home persona associated with presence of the instant messaging sender at home,

the method further comprising:

determining whether the instant messaging sender is at home or at the work location;

in response to a determination that the instant messaging sender is at home, selecting the home persona for use in the instant messaging communications session; and

in response to a determination that the instant messaging sender is at the work location, selecting the work persona for use in the instant messaging communications session.

36.   The method of claim 25 further comprising selecting a persona to be displayed by the potential instant messaging recipient based on time of day.

37.   The method of claim 25 further comprising selecting a persona to be displayed by the potential instant messaging recipient based on day of week.

38. The method of claim 25 further comprising selecting a persona to be displayed by the potential instant messaging recipient based on a group of potential instant messaging recipients that are associated with the potential instant messaging recipient.

5   39. The method of claim 25 wherein at least some of characteristics of a persona may be transparent to the instant messaging sender.

40. The method of claim 25 wherein the sender avatar is animated to send an out-of-band communication from the instant messaging sender to the potential instant messaging 10   recipient.

41. The method of claim 40 wherein the out-of-band communication comprises a communication indicating an environmental condition associated with the instant messaging sender.

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42. The method of claim 41 wherein the environmental condition comprises an environmental condition related to weather occurring in a geographic location near the instant messaging sender.

20   43. The method of claim 40 wherein the out-of-band communication comprises a communication indicating a personality characteristic associated with the instant messaging sender.

44. The method of claim 40 wherein the out-of-band communication comprises a 25   communication indicating an emotional state associated with the instant messaging sender.

45. The method of claim 40 wherein the out-of-band communication comprises a communication indicating a setting characteristic associated with the instant messaging sender.

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46. The method of claim 45 wherein the setting characteristic comprises a characteristic related to time of day of the instant messaging sender.

47.   The method of claim 40 wherein the setting characteristic comprises a characteristic related to time of year.

5   48.   The method of claim 47 wherein the time of year comprises a holiday.

49.   The method of claim 47 wherein the time of year comprises a season wherein the season is one of spring, summer, fall or winter.

10   50.   The method of claim 40 wherein the setting characteristic comprises a characteristic associated with a work setting.

51.   The method of claim 40 wherein the setting characteristic comprises a characteristic associated with a recreation setting.

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52.   The method of claim 51 wherein the recreation setting comprises a beach setting or a tropical setting.

53.   The method of claim 52 wherein the recreation setting comprises a winter

20   sport setting.

54.   A computer-readable medium or propagated signal having embodied thereon a computer program configured to enable perception of multiple online personas in an instant messaging communications session, the medium or signal comprising one or more code

25   segments configured to:

        render, on an instant messaging recipient system, an instant messaging application user interface for an instant messaging communications session involving at least one potential instant messaging recipient and a single potential instant messaging sender;

        send a message that includes a text message and a persona selected among multiple

30   possible personas associated with the instant messaging sender to be displayed by the potential instant messaging recipient when displaying the text message, the selected persona

comprising a collection of one or more self-expression items and a sender avatar capable of being animated; and

render the selected persona at the potential instant messaging recipient system when rendering another portion of the message.

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55.   The medium of claim 54 wherein the sender persona is selected by the instant messaging sender from the multiple possible personas associated with the instant messaging sender.

10   56.   The medium of claim 54 in which self-expression items comprise one or more of a wallpaper, an emoticon, and a sound.

57.   The medium of claim 54 wherein the one or more code segments are further configured to receive a selection of a persona to be displayed by the potential instant

15   messaging recipient based on a group of potential instant messaging recipients that are associated with the potential instant messaging recipient.

58.   The medium of claim 54 wherein the one or more code segments are configured to animate the sender avatar to send an out-of-band communication from the

20   instant messaging sender to the potential instant messaging recipient.

59.   The medium of claim 58 wherein the out-of-band communication comprises a communication indicating an environmental condition associated with the instant messaging sender.

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60.   The medium of claim 58 wherein the out-of-band communication comprises a communication indicating a personality characteristic associated with the instant messaging sender.

30   61.   The medium of claim 58 wherein the out-of-band communication comprises a communication indicating an emotional state associated with the instant messaging sender.

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62. The medium of claim 58 wherein the out-of-band communication comprises a communication indicating a setting characteristic associated with the instant messaging sender.

5   63. A system for enabling perception of multiple online personas in an instant messaging communications session, the system comprising a processor connected to a storage device and one or more input/output devices, wherein the processor is configured to:

render, on an instant messaging recipient system, an instant messaging application user interface for an instant messaging communications session involving at least one

10   potential instant messaging recipient and a single potential instant messaging sender;

send a message that includes a text message and a persona selected among multiple possible personas associated with the instant messaging sender to be displayed by the potential instant messaging recipient when displaying the text message, the selected persona comprising a collection of one or more self-expression items and a sender avatar capable of

15   being animated; and

render the selected persona at the potential instant messaging recipient system when rendering another portion of the message.

64. The system of claim 63 wherein the sender persona is selected by the instant

20   messaging sender from the multiple possible personas associated with the instant messaging sender.

65. The system of claim 63 in which self-expression items comprise one or more of a wallpaper, an emoticon, and a sound.

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66. The system of claim 63 wherein the processor is further configured to receive a selection of a persona to be displayed by the potential instant messaging recipient based on a group of potential instant messaging recipients that are associated with the potential instant messaging recipient.

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67. The system of claim 63 wherein the processor is configured to animate the sender avatar to send an out-of-band communication from the instant messaging sender to the potential instant messaging recipient.

68.   The system of claim 67 wherein the out-of-band communication comprises a communication indicating an environmental condition associated with the instant messaging sender.

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69.   The system of claim 67 wherein the out-of-band communication comprises a communication indicating a personality characteristic associated with the instant messaging sender.

10   70.   The system of claim 67 wherein the out-of-band communication comprises a communication indicating an emotional state associated with the instant messaging sender.

71.   The system of claim 67 wherein the out-of-band communication comprises a communication indicating a setting characteristic associated with the instant messaging

15   sender.

72.   A system for enabling perception of multiple online personas in an instant messaging communications session, the system comprising:

means to render, on an instant messaging recipient system, an instant messaging

20   application user interface for an instant messaging communications session involving at least one potential instant messaging recipient and a single potential instant messaging sender;

means to send a message that includes a text message and a persona selected among multiple possible personas associated with the instant messaging sender to be displayed by the potential instant messaging recipient when displaying the text message, the selected

25   persona comprising a collection of one or more self-expression items and a sender avatar capable of being animated; and

means to render the selected persona at the potential instant messaging recipient system when rendering another portion of the message.

30   73.   A computer-implemented method for using an avatar to communicate, the method comprising:

representing a user graphically using an avatar capable of being animated, wherein the avatar is associated with multiple animations and multiple features of appearance that represent a pattern of characteristics representing a personality of the avatar.

5   74.   The method of claim 73 wherein the avatar is associated with a description that identifies the personality of the avatar.

75.   The method of claim 73 wherein the personality of the avatar includes at least some characteristics that are distinct of at least some characteristics of a personality of the

10   user.

76.   The method of claim 73 further comprising:

graphically representing a second user with a second avatar capable of being animated wherein the second avatar is associated with multiple animations and multiple

15   features of appearance that represent a pattern of characteristics representing a personality of the second avatar,

wherein:

the personality of the second avatar includes at least some characteristics that are distinct of at least some characteristics of the personality of the first avatar, and

20   communication messages are being sent between the first user and the second user.

77.   A computer-readable medium or propagated signal having embodied thereon a computer program configured to use an avatar to communicate, the medium or signal comprising one or more code segments configured to:

25   represent a user graphically using an avatar capable of being animated, wherein the avatar is associated with multiple animations and multiple features of appearance that represent a pattern of characteristics representing a personality of the avatar.

78.   A system for using an avatar to communicate, the system comprising a

30   processor connected to a storage device and one or more input/output devices, wherein the processor is configured to:

represent a user graphically using an avatar capable of being animated, wherein the avatar is associated with multiple animations and multiple features of appearance that represent a pattern of characteristics representing a personality of the avatar.

5   79.   A system for using an avatar to communicate, the system comprising:

means for representing a user graphically using an avatar capable of being animated, wherein the avatar is associated with multiple animations and multiple features of appearance that represent a pattern of characteristics representing a personality of the avatar.